

Social network analysis of alternative local food systems in Belgium.

Summary

What is the role of social learning inside local food networks aiming at a transition to a sustainable food system? In the project Food4Sustainability a research consortium sets out to investigate the network characteristics and learning processes occurring in these local food networks in Belgium. A conceptual framework was developed reflecting the transdisciplinarity of the consortium and aimed at analysing the different levels of the network. The hypothesis in the first part of the project is the importance of the contribution of converging strategic policy beliefs to a collaborative atmosphere amongst the different actors in the local food network. This was assessed by a social network analysis through a series of semi-structured interviews with key players in the local food network.

Abstract

The current agricultural system has at the core of its paradigm a clear focus on increased production, with increased intensification as the answer to current global societal and environmental issues. It is clear to many however that following a business as usual path will put increased tension on the already stressed planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). Climate changes, economic and demographic evolutions will even further increase the pressure on the food system and challenge its resilience to planetary and societal shocks. Alternative food systems exist however in parallel to this mainstream food system. These systems are alternative in the sense that they challenge the mainstreams paradigm of ever increasing production which does not take into account the production of seemingly inevitable negative externalities. These alternative food systems are characterised by additional aims and set out to answer other societal needs and challenges, like healthy food, food waste, climate change mitigation, poverty in rural areas and fragmentation of open space. Growing interest in the promises of alternative food systems which aim at re-joining producers and consumers can be seen throughout Western Europe. In Belgium, systems like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), food basket schemes, urban and peri-urban agriculture enjoy increased attention both from citizens and academics.

A research consortium was established between three universities of the three different regions in Belgium; Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders, in order to study the transition to a sustainable alternative food system. The study set out to analyse the constraints and opportunities of different components of the alternative local food system. The specific aim of this study is to analyse the local food networks in 5 regions of Belgium, focussing on the governance mechanisms, motivations and network organisations which lead to thriving bottom up initiatives aiming at increasing the sustainability of the agricultural system.

In order to assess the local food network, different levels on which this alternative system functions were distinguished; micro, meso and macro level. The micro-level refers to the individual, where every person acts from his or her own knowledge, background, experience and paradigm. Every link in the chain, from producer to consumer, has its peculiar individual set of personal characteristics. The meso-level points to the organisational level, including the internal guidelines and views, but also the surrounding network of similar organisations and involved actors. The macro level finally

encompasses the legal and societal framework in which the organisation operates. A conceptual framework was established encompassing the different disciplines present in the consortium. Four different perspectives on the alternative food system and the processes occurring herein were combined, resulting in three different study phases each with a different unit of analysis.

An initial network mapping of the main actors surrounding local food basket schemes in 5 city regions in Belgium was undertaken to identify key influential actors as a first part of a social network analysis. The resulting network nodes identified key actors and potential network bridging organisations with a role in social learning processes (Berkes, 2009). Following this mapping a semi-structured series of interviews was carried out with leaders of different food basket initiatives (n 75). This first series of interviews aimed at completing and enriching the social network analysis and assessing the organisational collaborations and knowledge transfer. One associated hypothesis in this study phase is the importance of the contribution of converging strategic policy beliefs to a collaborative atmosphere amongst the different actors in the local food network.

This study combines different research fields to assess the various organisational, social and economic components of successful transition initiatives in the agri-food system. This project, Food4Sustainability, is funded by the federal science policy office (BELSPO) in Belgium and should lead to policy and organisational recommendations, through the provision of organisational tools and insights which could be used and implemented by government agencies and the transition initiatives themselves.

References

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